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The Role of Feared Possible Selves on the Relationship Between Peer Influence and Delinquency

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of a feared delinquent possible self on the relationship between exposure to negative peer behaviors and violent and non-violent self-reported delinquency. Previous research strongly supports that deviant peers influence adolescents' delinquent behavior. Yet, few studies have explored intrapersonal factors that may moderate this influence. Possible selves include what one hopes, expects and fears becoming and are believed to motivate behavior. Thus, it was hypothesized that adolescents who were exposed to deviant peers and also feared engaging in delinquency would be more likely to self-report delinquency. Seventh grade students ($n = 176$) identified feared possible selves in the future, their exposure to negative peer behavior and self-reported violent and non-violent delinquent behavior. Findings suggest that exposure to negative peer behavior is associated with self-reported delinquent behavior. For violent behavior, possessing a feared delinquent possible self moderates this relationship. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords

possible selves; adolescence; delinquency; violence

Delinquency is a serious concern during the period of adolescence. In 2011, nearly a million adolescents under the age of 18 were arrested for crimes ranging from larceny to murder (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Involvement in delinquency places adolescents at risk for physical injury and is associated with greater likelihood of engagement in other non-normative behaviors (e.g., alcohol and drug use; Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000;

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Valois, McKeown, Garrison, & Vincent, 1995). Adolescent delinquency also places an enormous economic burden on society in general (Miller, Fisher & Cohen, 2001; Waters, Hyder, Rajkotia, Rehwinkel, & Butchart, 2004). Given the serious individual, social and economic costs of engaging in such activity, it is important to understand risk factors associated with involvement as well as factors that may buffer their impact.

Adolescents are remarkably similar to their friends on many traits and behaviors (Kandel, 1978). Previous research and theory overwhelmingly suggests strong associations between peer behavior and adolescents' perpetration of delinquency (Agnew, 1991; Akers & Jensen, 2006; Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Brook, Brook, Rubenstone, Zhang, & Saar, 2011; Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li & Spracklen, 1997; Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews & Patterson, 1996; Fergusson, Vitaro, Wanner, & Brendgen, 2007; Griffin, Scheier, Botvin, Diaz & Miller, 1999; Kandel, 1978, Moffitt, 1993; Patterson et al., 2000; Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito, 2001; Simons, Johnson, Beaman, Conger, & Whitbeck, 1996; Snyder, Dishion & Patterson, 1986; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994). Despite consistent support for this relationship, there is a dearth of research exploring the potential mechanisms through which this influence is expressed, including exacerbation and dampening of effects by individual-level characteristics of the target youth (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). The present study expands our current understanding of individual-level characteristics by examining the role that fear of participating in delinquency plays in the relationship between negative peer influence and violent and non-violent self-reported delinquent behavior.

Delinquency and Negative Peer Behavior

Delinquent behavior increases in prevalence during adolescence and is common among youth (Moffitt, 1993). However, although most adolescents engage in some delinquent behavior during this developmental period, many do not (Moffitt, 1993). Furthermore, most adolescents who engage in delinquent behavior do not continue to engage in delinquent or criminal activity into adulthood (Moffitt, 1993). Therefore, an important question remains regarding the factors that lead to delinquent behavior for some, and abstinence or desistance from such behavior in others.

The social learning theory of deviance (Akers & Jensen, 2006) contends that the acquisition of delinquent behavior occurs through association with individuals who model such behavior. Through these relationships, negative behavior is imitated, conditioned and reinforced and definitions favoring the behavior are formed (Akers & Jensen, 2006). Differential association with deviant peers may be particularly important in explaining delinquent behavior (Akers & Jensen, 2006). Adolescents' delinquent behavior has been frequently linked to that of their peers (Agnew, 1991; Akers & Jensen, 2006; Brook et al., 2011; Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Dishion et al., 1996; 1997; Fergusson et al., 2007; Griffin et al., 1999; Kandel, 1978; Moffitt, 1993; Patterson et al., 2000; Prinstein et al., 2001; Simons et al., 1996; Snyder et al., 1986; Thornberry et al., 1994; Young & Rees, 2013). During this developmental stage, peers become more important and consequential to adolescents' social lives (Youniss & Haynie, 1992). Social learning perspectives suggest

that behavior will most closely match those with whom the individual spends the most time and with whom their relationship is closest (Agnew, 1991; Akers & Jensen, 2006).

Numerous factors may buffer the impact of peer behavior, including both inter- and intrapersonal processes (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). Characteristics of the peer relationship such as strength of attachment or time spent together can affect behavior modeling (e.g., Agnew, 1991). Previous research also suggests that the relationship between peer deviance and delinquent behavior and substance use is moderated by characteristics of the target youth, including depressive symptoms (Prinstein et al., 2001); susceptibility to peer influence (Prinstein, Brechwald, & Cohen, 2011); novelty seeking and timing of pubertal maturation (Fergusson et al., 2007); and low autonomy development and poor social skills for handling deviance (Allen, Chango, Dzwedo, Schad & Marston, 2012). Meldrum, Miller, and Flexon (2013) found that the positive relationship between susceptibility to peer influence and self-reported delinquency was exacerbated by high levels of self-control. Furthermore, Dumas, Ellis, and Wolfe (2012) found that the association between perceptions of peer pressure and delinquent behavior was moderated by identity status. Thus, the relationship between peer behavior and delinquency is not the same for all individuals. Factors associated with the self-concept (e.g., possible selves) may also interact with peer influence in predicting delinquent behavior. It is plausible that the expected impact of negative peers may depend on adolescents' belief that they could engage in that behavior.

Possible Selves

Previous research and theory has focused on the importance of the self-concept in guiding cognition and behavior. Markus and Nurius (1986) extended the notion of the self-concept to include possible future selves in addition to conceptions of the self in the past and present. Possible selves are elements of the self-concept that "can be viewed as a cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats....[T]hey provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation" (Markus and Nurius, pp. 954). Notions of the self are believed to guide the interpretation of self-relevant information, such as social, contextual and situational factors (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Possible selves can include what one expects to become, hopes to become as well as what one fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These possible selves are believed to become motivators of action (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Hopes and expectations are believed to be accompanied by action plans to achieve these goals. Similarly, feared possible selves are believed to represent failures to achieve important goals; thus, individuals are motivated to avoid these possibilities. The concept of possible selves has been used to examine a variety of different phenomena and behaviors, including identity formation (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001), self-esteem and self-worth (Knox, Funk, Elliot & Bush, 1998), academic performance (Fraser & Eccles, 1995a; Leonardi, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry & Hart-Johnson, 2004), health-related behaviors (Aloise-Young, Hennigan, & Leong, 2001), and delinquency (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993), as well as gender and age-related differences (Anthis, Dunkel & Anderson, 2004; Cross & Markus, 1991; Fraser & Eccles, 1995b; Knox, Funk, Elliot, & Bush, 2000).

Oyserman and colleagues (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993) have explored the relationship between possible selves and delinquency. Oyserman and Markus (1990a) assessed expected, hoped for and feared possible selves in a sample of urban youth and found that youth with higher levels of delinquency reported more negative expected selves as well as more fears about crime and delinquency. Additionally, self-reported delinquent behavior was associated with including “crime” as a feared possible self. Extending this investigation, Oyserman and Saltz (1993) examined possible selves as well as attempts to attain or avoid these possible selves in a sample of youth who differed in their histories of delinquent behavior. Delinquent youth were less likely than non-delinquent youth to balance a positive, expected self with an opposing negative feared self within the same domain (e.g., possessing both an expectation of academic achievement as well as a fear of academic failure), and also expressed fewer efforts to attain or avoid these possible selves. Among non-delinquent youth, more balanced possible selves were associated with less self-reported theft and fewer attempts to attain or avoid the possible selves were associated with higher self-reported hooliganism. Among delinquent youth, fewer attempts to achieve or avoid possible selves were associated with greater truancy. However, the analyses did not include an examination of domain-specific possible selves (e.g., delinquency).

Despite these findings, the impact of possible selves specifically within the domain of delinquency is unclear. Understanding the impact of feared delinquency specifically may be an important step in understanding the link between feared possible selves and delinquent behavior. Most studies examining possible selves have assessed either the motivational impact of positive, expected selves (Aloise-Young et al., 2001) or balance among various possible selves irrespective of a specific domain (i.e., by matching positively valenced and negatively valenced possible selves in the same categories; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). By matching positively valenced possible selves with negatively valenced possible selves in the same domains, researchers obtain a general calculation of factors that individuals both hope for (on the positive end) and fear (on the negative end). Previous research has not been able to include fears of delinquency in measures of balance as expectations of avoiding delinquent behavior, which would be the necessary opposing-valence possible self, are seldom reported (Meek, 2011; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a). Oyserman and Markus (1990a) found that youth who self-reported delinquency were more likely to list “crime” as a feared possible self; however, they did not counter these fears with positive expectations for or hopes of avoiding crime. Furthermore, in a sample of criminal offenders between 18 and 21 years of age, 44% feared recidivism, while few hoped (8%) or expected (7%) to avoid crime in the future (Meek, 2011). Because individuals seldom list hopes associated with avoiding delinquency, those who fear delinquency are simply considered to have less balance because these fears are not matched with the positively valenced possible self of “avoid delinquency.” For example, if an individual lists only academic success when asked to provide positively valenced possible selves, but lists only delinquency as a feared possible self, this individual would be considered as having no balance. This individual may be placed within the same category (i.e., no balance) as an individual who lists only hoped for academic possible selves paired with only interpersonal fears. However, a feared delinquent possible self may be a distinctly

important construct in its own right. Evidence suggests the merit of investigating types of possible selves separately (i.e., count of feared possible selves) and in specific domains (e.g., delinquency; Oyserman et al., 2004; Aloise-Young et al., 2001).

Feared possible selves may influence behavior differently than positive expected selves. Feared possible selves do not seem to be accompanied by the action plans that are associated with positive expected selves (Erikson, 2007; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2004; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). Therefore, the question remains as to how fear may impact behavior. Expressing a fear of delinquency may simply indicate an integration of this expectation into one's future-oriented self-concept. Although it may motivate avoidance behavior when accompanied by a positively valenced desire to avoid such behavior, this is seldom the case (Meek, 2011; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). Instead, fear of delinquency may suggest the perceived possibility that one could engage in delinquency without the expectation or hope that one can avoid it (Oyserman & Markus, 1990b).

Realization of the possible self depends on social conditions (Markus & Nurius, 1986). According to Markus and Nurius (1986), only in contexts where the possible self can be expressed and its expression is encouraged will one's behavior match that associated with the given possible self. Although adolescents may fear engaging in delinquency and, thus, appear to hold a negative view of such behavior, this may still frame the negative behavior of others in a self-reflective way. Adolescents who possess a fear of becoming delinquent may be more likely to express this behavior in the context of encouraging peers. Furthermore, for an adolescent who fears becoming delinquent, a social group that engages in delinquent behavior may confirm this future self-concept, making it harder to change and avoid. Similarly, the expression of delinquent behavior in the context of similar peers may depend on one's ability to identify with this type of behavior. Compared to adolescents who do not include this possibility in their self-concept, those who do may be more likely to engage in delinquency as they may lack the agentic qualities that would aid in the attainment of opposing, positive possible selves. Including this possibility in their self-concept represents a notion of one's identity that they are capable of achieving this end-state (i.e., being delinquent).

Present Study

The present study explores the effect of feared delinquency on the relationship between negative peer influence and violent and non-violent self-reported delinquency in a sample of middle-school students. We hypothesized a direct effect between negative peer influence and violent and non-violent self-reported delinquency (i.e., youth who reported more negative peer influence would report more violent and/or non-violent delinquency behaviors). We also hypothesized that this relationship would be moderated by the presence of feared possible selves, such that the impact of negative peers would be greater when the adolescent feared becoming delinquent.

Method

Participants

This study is based on data collected as part of a school-based survey focused on understanding risk and protective factors for youth violence and bullying. The sample consisted of 196 seventh grade students ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.39$, $SD = .52$; 60% female) enrolled in a suburban public middle school in the Midwestern US. Though the school is located in a suburban neighborhood, the district cuts across both suburban and urban areas, making the student population highly diverse. Of the seventh grade students in this middle school at the time of survey administration, 71% were considered economically disadvantaged. The sample consisted of 45% African American, 27% White, 21% Multiracial, and 7% Other. Participants who did not complete at least 50% of the scale items for each measure, or did not provide possible selves, were not included in the analyses. This left a sample size of 176. Attrition analyses suggest that the students who were excluded did not differ significantly from those who were included in age, $t(194) = .42$, $p = .68$; gender, $\chi^2(1, n = 194) = .005$, $p = .94$; or ethnicity, $\chi^2(1, n = 196) = .56$, $p = .45$.

Procedure

The study was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board. A Certificate of Confidentiality was obtained from the National Institutes of Health. Prior to students completing the survey, both written parental consent and student assent were obtained. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and no compensation was provided to participants.

Trained research staff administered the paper-and-pencil survey during health class in the 2011-2012 academic year. Thus, students completed the surveys in groups of 10 to 56 participants ($M_{\text{group size}} = 35.66$; $SD = 13.84$). Parental consent was required for survey participation. Students that did not have parental consent or did not give assent were provided with worksheets to complete during the class period (60% response rate). At least four researchers were present during each survey administration. Researchers redirected students who were distracted and assisted with any questions. Participants were informed that their responses were private and anonymous prior to completing the survey in order to encourage open and honest responding. The survey included items related to future expectations and possible selves, peer influences, and violent and delinquent behaviors and was completed within 45 minutes. For participants with lower reading levels or limited English proficiency ($n = 4$), the survey was read aloud privately in a separate classroom.

Measures

Negative peer behaviors—The Negative Peer Behaviors Scale was comprised of nine items (Dielman, Butchart, Shope, & Miller, 1993; Stacy, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1992; Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2012). Sample items include: “How many of your friends have been suspended from school?” and “How many of your friends get into fights?” Response options ranged from 1 (*None*) to 5 (*All*). We computed a mean composite score with higher scores indicating more negative peer behaviors ($\alpha = .84$).

Self-reported violent delinquency—Self-reported violent delinquency was measured using five items based off of a scale previously used by Resnick, Ireland, and Borowsky (2004). The original scale assessed behavior in the previous year; the current study modified this scale to assess these behaviors over the past month. Participants indicated how often they had engaged in the following behaviors during the past month: been in a physical fight; taken part in a fight where a group of your friends were against another group; hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or a doctor; carried a weapon; and used or threatened to use a weapon to get something from someone. Response options ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*5 Times or More*). We computed a mean composite score with higher scores indicating more violent behavior ($\alpha = .79$).

Self-reported non-violent delinquency—Self-reported non-violent delinquency was assessed with four items modified from a scale previously used by Zimmerman, Salem and Notaro (2000) and Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister (2012). The original scale assessed behavior in the previous year; the current study modified this scale to assess these behaviors over the past month. Participants indicated how often they engaged in the following delinquent behaviors during the past month: gone into some house or building when you weren't supposed to be there; damaged school property on purpose; set fire to someone's property on purpose; and gotten into trouble with police because of something you did. Response options ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*5 Times or More*). We computed a mean composite score with higher scores indicating higher levels of non-violent delinquency ($\alpha = .62$).

Feared possible selves—Adolescents completed three open-ended questions assessing what they hope to become in high school, what they fear becoming in high school, and what they worry or fear when thinking about the future. Each of these questions was assessed qualitatively using an open-ended prompt. The present study focused on adolescents' feared possible selves. The prompt stated, "What are four things you do not want to be true of you when you are in high school, or that you most want to avoid becoming by the time you are in high school?" On the paper-and-pencil survey, each prompt was followed by four lines on which participants could list responses. Thus, participants could provide up to four fears. Participants were not provided with examples; instead, participants were able to provide any response they chose. Each response listed by participants was coded into one of 14 categories. Thirteen of the categories were based off of existing coding schemes for possible selves (Fraser & Eccles, 1995a; 1995b; Oyserman, 2004), while one new category was created by coders (i.e., long-term goals beyond the acceptable timeframe). This category was added because some responses were not adequately captured using the modified version of the previously established coding schemes. The present study focused on the category of non-normative and delinquent behavior (i.e. "using drugs"; "expelled"; "violence"). All responses were coded by two different coders ($\kappa = 0.94$). Both coders were blind to participants' responses on all other measures. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed until a final category was agreed upon. See Appendix A for the full list of categories and examples.

Demographic characteristics—Participants were asked to report their ethnicity and gender. Multivariate analyses incorporated ethnicity (0 = non-White; 1 = White) and gender (0 = male; 1 = female) as demographic control variables.

Data Analytic Strategy

Although participants were asked to provide four feared possible selves, many students did not provide four. Therefore, relative frequency of each category mentioned was used in place of the count of each category mentioned. Thus, feared delinquent possible selves represents the number of times feared delinquency was mentioned divided by the total number of feared possible selves listed.

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were run to determine whether feared delinquency moderated the relationship between negative peer behaviors and self-reported violent and non-violent delinquency. Previous research has suggested potential ethnic and gender differences in possible selves, delinquency and the relationship between deviant peers and delinquency (Deutsch, Crockett, Wolff & Russell, 2012; Miller, Malone & Dodge, 2010; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Zheng & Cleveland, 2013); thus, ethnicity and gender were entered on the first step to account for these demographic factors¹. Negative peer behaviors and feared delinquency were centered prior to analyses. These variables were entered on the second step and their interaction was entered on the third step.

Results

Descriptive and Bivariate Analyses

Of those who completed the possible self measure ($n = 185$), more than half reported delinquency as a feared possible self (52%; $n = 96$). Of those who did mention feared delinquency, most mentioned this fear only once (42%; $n = 40$). Four percent of all participants mentioned it for every possible response ($n = 8$). Of those who completed the self-reported delinquency measures ($n = 189$), 19% had engaged in non-violent delinquency behavior ($n = 35$), while 40% had engaged in violent delinquency ($n = 75$). Of those who self-reported violent and non-violent delinquency, the number of acts committed was typically low. See Table 1 for descriptive information for the study variables.

There were no significant differences associated with ethnicity for self-reported violent ($M_{\text{White}} = 1.38$, $SD = 1.01$; $M_{\text{non-White}} = 1.26$, $SD = .51$; $t[58] = -.84$, $p = .41$) or nonviolent delinquency ($M_{\text{White}} = 1.12$, $SD = .26$; $M_{\text{non-White}} = 1.09$, $SD = .29$; $t[187] = -.54$, $p = .59$). Males self-reported marginally more violent delinquency compared to females ($M_{\text{male}} = 1.43$, $SD = .90$; $M_{\text{female}} = 1.21$, $SD = .47$; $t[99] = 1.94$, $p = .06$). However, they did not significantly differ for self-reported non-violent delinquency ($M_{\text{male}} = 1.10$, $SD = .29$; $M_{\text{female}} = 1.09$, $SD = .28$; $t[186] = .17$, $p = .87$). Bivariate correlations suggest that more negative peer influence experienced by participants was associated with more self-reported violent and non-violent delinquency (Table 1). Additionally, self-reported violent and non-

¹Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were also run without controlling for ethnicity and gender. The results were substantively the same for both self-reported violent delinquency and non-violent delinquency as when both demographics were included in the models.

violent delinquency were moderately positively correlated. Feared delinquency was positively correlated with reported perpetration of violent delinquency, though it was not correlated with self-reported non-violent delinquency.

Multivariate Analyses

Self-reported violent delinquency—Results for each step are shown in Table 2. Step 1 examined the relationship between the demographic covariates and self-reported violent delinquency. As indicated in the bivariate analyses, males reported more violent delinquency than females ($\beta = -.16$; $p = .04$). Step 2 examined the direct effects of negative peer behaviors and feared delinquency on self-reported violent delinquency. After controlling for demographic variables, higher levels of negative peer behaviors were associated with higher levels of self-reported violent delinquency ($\beta = .33$; $p < .001$). Feared delinquency was also associated with higher levels of self-reported violent delinquency ($\beta = .15$; $p = .04$). Step 3 includes the interaction of negative peer behaviors and feared delinquency on self-reported violent delinquency. The negative peer behaviors by feared delinquency interaction term was associated with higher levels of self-reported violent delinquency ($\beta = .22$; $p = .001$).

Figure 1 decomposes the interaction effect. The graph depicts the relationship between negative peer behaviors and varying levels of feared delinquency. More negative peer behaviors were associated with higher levels of self-reported violent delinquency, but violent behaviors were even higher for youth reporting high feared delinquency. For youth with fewer negative peer influences, feared delinquency did not distinguish groups. A simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that high negative peer behaviors predicted self-reported violent delinquency among individuals with high feared delinquency ($b = .62$, $p < .001$) and average levels of feared delinquency ($b = .36$, $p < .001$), but not among individuals with low feared delinquency ($b = .10$, $p = .40$).

Self-reported non-violent delinquency—Step 1 examined the relationship between the demographic covariates and self-reported non-violent delinquency. Self-reported non-violent delinquency was not associated with ethnicity or gender. Step 2 examined the direct effects of negative peer behaviors and feared delinquency on self-reported non-violent delinquency. After controlling for demographic variables, negative peer behaviors were associated with higher levels of self-reported non-violent delinquency ($\beta = .48$; $p < .001$); however, feared delinquency was not associated with self-reported non-violent delinquency ($\beta = -.06$; $p = .39$). Step 3 includes the interaction of negative peer behaviors and feared delinquency on self-reported non-violent delinquency. The interaction was not significant.

Discussion

Previous research supports the assertion that feared delinquency is associated with delinquent behavior (Meek, 2011; Oyserman & Markus, 1990a). Yet, this is the first study to focus on the feared possible self domain, and specifically a feared delinquent possible self, in exploring self-reported delinquent behavior. Our findings partially supported our hypothesis that adolescents who did not fear engaging in delinquency, thereby not integrating such behavior into their identities, would not exhibit the same influence to negative peer behaviors. Feared delinquency moderated the relationship between negative

peer behaviors and self-reported violent delinquency, although not for self-reported non-violent delinquency.

Our study and its findings are unique in that although previous research has provided some focused attention to positive expected selves, feared selves have not been examined separately. Furthermore, links between possible selves and delinquency have typically focused on the extent of balance among positively and negatively valenced possible selves in similar domains (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). Alternatively, the present study suggests that focusing solely on feared delinquency may be an interesting and important avenue for future research, as fears of delinquency are not often matched by a countervailing positive expectation or hope to avoid such behavior. In the present study, only 12 participants desired to avoid negative traits (i.e., listed avoidance of negative traits after the prompt for what they hope to become in high school); thus, it was not possible to evaluate balance in this specific domain as done in previous work using other domain categories (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). Our findings suggest that fears of delinquency are important to consider, but it may be necessary to examine them independently.

Despite the lack of a direct relationship between feared possible selves and peer behavior, the results suggest that possible selves provide a lens through which peer behavior is interpreted and processed, leading to one's own delinquent behavior. For individuals who possess a fear of perpetrating delinquency, this behavior may only be expressed in favorable social conditions (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Additionally, fear of delinquency may represent the sense that one is restricted by outside forces, leading to greater influence by the social context (Erikson, 2007; Oyserman & Markus, 1990b). Alternatively, behaving in a violent way may require the belief that one is capable of such behavior. Thus, even if individuals are rooted in an environment in which peers frequently exhibit negative behavior, adolescents may only engage in the same behavior if they see themselves as capable of acting that way. Conversely, not possessing a feared delinquent possible self may be protective and, thereby, buffer the well-established risk factor of deviant peers on delinquent behavior. This suggestion is supported by the simple slopes analysis, which showed only individuals with low levels of feared delinquency (compared to both high and average levels) did not exhibit increased self-reported violent delinquency in the context of a deviant peer group.

The findings suggest that adolescents who are entrenched in a negative peer group may perpetrate violence if they fear they are capable of engaging in delinquency. Yet, other explanations are possible. Lack of perceived control over positive outcomes may result in the creation of negative possible selves, which may direct future behavior and constrain possible alternatives (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990b). Thus, an adolescent who experiences low self-efficacy to avoid delinquency may limit their abilities to achieve more positive outcomes. Although it is tempting to suggest that the behavior of negative peers directly impacts the construction of feared possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), this is not supported by the current findings. Thus, although friends may be used as referents for one's own behavior, the construction of possible selves is likely indicative of a wide range of influences and factors, including cultural and social role pressures, family

influence, media exposure, and intrapersonal processes such as personality and temperament (Erikson, 2007; Oyserman & Markus, 1990b).

The non-significant findings related to non-violent delinquency may be due to limited variance in the outcome, the possibility that the activities assessed are not relevant to this age group, or the sample size may have been too L to detect an effect. However, although they are highly correlated, the distinction between violent and non-violent delinquency is important and may suggest different predictors and consequences (Loeber & Schmalting, 1985; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998). The integration of a possible delinquent future self may be integral to explaining more extreme behavior like violence, while non-violent delinquency may be seen as more normative and not necessarily a part of one's identity. However, not all researchers agree that various forms of delinquency represent distinct categories of behavior (e.g., Patterson et al., 2000); thus, this suggestion is speculative.

Several study limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional nature of the study requires a critical interpretation of the results. It is unclear whether peer influence and feared delinquency causally impact violent behavior. During mid-adolescence, it is likely that adolescents both select peers that are similar to themselves as well as are influenced by the deviant behavior of their friends (Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Monahan, Steinberg, & Cauffman, 2009; Snyder et al., 1986; Thornberry et al., 1994). Thus, although the present study suggests that negative peer behavior influences self-reported delinquency, it is possible that delinquent adolescents select similar peers. Regarding the impact of possible selves, Markus and Nurius (1986) contend that the relationship between possible selves and behavior is bidirectional. Therefore, adolescents who exhibit violent behavior may, in turn, construct feared delinquent possible selves. Adolescents may fear becoming delinquent because they have behaved in ways consistent with this fear. Because the current study was cross-sectional, this explanation is possible. The firmly articulated tenant that possible selves motivate behavior justifies the current analyses to some extent (Erikson, 2007; Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, future research would benefit from longitudinal and experimental studies that examine the link between delinquent behavior and feared possible selves in order to tease apart this likely bidirectional effect. In addition, while the current sample was diverse and provided unique information about young adolescents, future research would benefit from replicating these findings in other samples of adolescents and among youth at different stages of adolescence (Harter, 1990).

The present study utilized a brief, open-ended paper-and-pencil measure to assess feared possible selves, with the option to report four possible selves. Both closed- and open-ended measures have been used in previous research (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). The open-ended format used in this study has been utilized in previous research with adolescents (Fraser & Eccles, 1995a; 1995b; Oyserman & Markus, 1990), was based on an established measure and coding scheme (Oyserman, 2004), and is thought to be more appropriate for eliciting personally relevant and salient ideas of the self-concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, it is important to note that different results may be obtained if a different measurement format (e.g., close-ended checklist), method (e.g., verbal responses) or possible number of responses (e.g., allowing more than four responses) is used. Furthermore, the nature of this measure suggests that some individuals may not elicit a fear

of delinquency and may, in fact, desire this possible self. While no participants indicated a desire to be delinquent (i.e., a hoped-for delinquent self) in the present study, this possibility should be considered in future research.

Researchers have also acknowledged the limitation of self-report methodologies (e.g., Haynie & Osgood, 2005). Future research would benefit from the use of alternate methodologies (e.g., one-on-one interviews, assessment of police report data) to confirm the associations found in the present study. However, other methodologies are also plagued by drawbacks (e.g., increased time and cost; under-representation of delinquent behavior; Thornberry & Krohn, 2000). Self-report surveys are a commonly used and generally acceptable way to assess delinquent behavior (Thornberry & Krohn, 2000). Furthermore, adolescents are generally honest in reporting sensitive behavior (e.g., sex and drug use; Needle, McCubbin, Lorence, & Hochhauser, 1983; Siegel, Aten, & Roghmann, 1998), and the number of participants who appear to deliberately mislead researchers is very low (Fan et al., 2006; Needle et al., 1983). Incorporating 'validity checks' within surveys can help researchers identify adolescents who are not taking the survey seriously (Fan et al., 2006).

Finally, feared delinquency may be confounded by other individual-level characteristics. Numerous factors moderate the relationship between peer influence and adolescents' behavior (Allen et al., 2012; Fergusson et al., 2007; Prinstein et al., 2001; 2011). It is possible that fears about engaging in delinquency are part of a higher order construct related to negative affectivity or poor social skills (Allen et al., 2012; Prinstein et al., 2001) or may simply represent a greater susceptibility to peer influence (Monahan et al., 2009; Prinstein et al., 2011). Future research may benefit from examining the relationship between possible selves and other important factors that influence the relationship between peers and adolescents' behavior.

The present study extends previous work highlighting the importance of possible selves during adolescence and offers unique avenues for intervention. Our findings suggest that possessing a picture of oneself perpetrating delinquency in the future may be an important factor in actually engaging in violent behavior, whereas not expressing feared delinquency may buffer the impact of negative peers. As such, interventions that assist youth in reducing these fears and altering the perceived potential of engaging in delinquency may reduce violent and delinquent behavior even in the presence of delinquent peers. Alternatively, it is possible that the impact of feared delinquency is driven by the lack of balance between expected and feared possible selves (Oyserman & Markus, 1990b). As such, encouraging youth to adopt expectations of avoiding negative behavior may be paramount. It may also be important to understand the factors that drive the impact of feared possible selves on behavior, such as availability and accessibility of possible selves (Norman & Aron, 2003) and accompanying plans for achieving the possible selves (Erikson, 2007; Oyserman et al. 2004). Encouraging adolescents to develop articulated plans to achieve positive possible selves and avoid negative possible selves may also be important. These potential avenues for intervention provide additional areas for future research.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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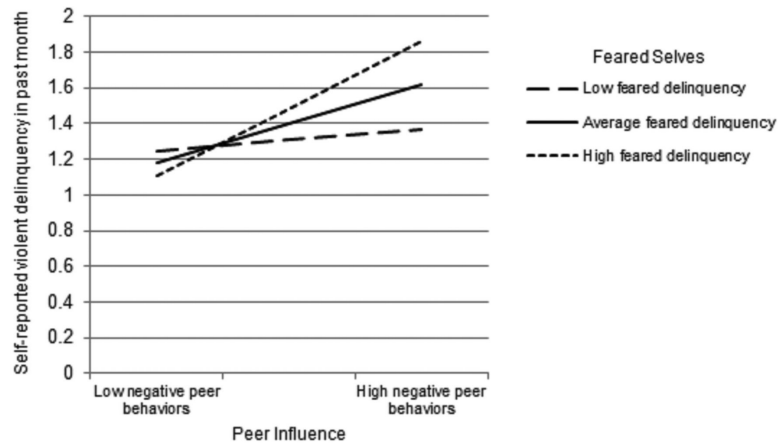


Figure 1. Moderation of the relationship between negative peer behaviors and self-reported violent delinquency by feared delinquency. Slopes were plotted at the mean and ± 1 SD.

Table 1

Descriptives and Intercorrelations of Study Variables

	1	2	3	Mean	SD	Skew
1. Negative Peer Behaviors	--			1.70	.60	1.75
2. Feared Delinquency	.05	--		24.23	28.94	1.02
3. Self-reported Violent Delinquency	.34**	.17*	--	1.29	.68	4.04
4. Self-reported Non-violent Delinquency	.46**	-.03	.46**	1.10	.28	4.40

Note. Variables were excluded listwise. Therefore, sample sizes for correlation coefficients vary (range $n = 179$ to $n = 189$).

*
 $p < .05$

**
 $p < .01$

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Self-Reported Violent and Non-Violent Delinquency (n = 176)

Variable	B	SE(B)	β	R ²
Self-reported Violent Delinquency				
Step 1				.031
Ethnicity	.126	.116	.081	
Gender	-.224	.106	-.157*	
Step 2				.138**
Ethnicity	.104	.110	.067	
Gender	-.206	.100	-.145*	
Feared Delinquency	.004	.002	.147*	
Negative Peer Behavior	.385	.081	.333**	
Step 3				.048**
Ethnicity	.071	.107	.045	
Gender	-.203	.098	-.143*	
Feared Delinquency	.003	.002	.143*	
Negative Peer Behavior	.362	.079	.313**	
Feared Delinquency X Negative Peer Behavior	.009	.003	.222**	
Self-reported Non-violent Delinquency				
Step 1				.002
Ethnicity	.023	.049	.036	
Gender	-.011	.045	-.018	
Step 2				.223**
Ethnicity	-.013	.044	-.021	
Gender	-.024	.040	-.040	
Feared Delinquency	-.001	.001	-.060	
Negative Peer Behavior	.228	.033	.476**	
Step 3				.003
Ethnicity	-.010	.044	-.016	
Gender	-.024	.040	-.041	
Feared Delinquency	-.001	.001	-.059	
Negative Peer Behavior	.230	.033	.481**	
Feared Delinquency X Negative Peer Behavior	-.001	.001	-.054	

Note. Ethnicity was coded as 0 = non-White and 1 = White. Gender was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female.

*
 $p < .05$ **
 $p < .01$